

Crafting Quality Flexible Jobs - Leaning In on our terms

The debate about how to enable women's progression into senior organisational levels has been running for some time. The benefits of encouraging the careers of talented women are well documented, as are the social arguments for doing so. Committed employers are likely to offer a range of support mechanisms such as coaching and mentoring schemes, leadership programmes and measures to identify and eradicate unconscious bias. So why does it seem as if so little progress is being made? It's not that the women themselves are either incapable of or unwilling to take on greater responsibility – as evidenced by the ever growing numbers leaving the corporate world to set up their own business.⁽¹⁾

The search for balanced working

Both anecdotal evidence and a number of recent surveys suggest one of the key reasons women step off the corporate career ladder is to “achieve better balance”. In this context there has never been a better time for forward-thinking employers to redesign senior jobs to both accommodate this desire and enhance agile working. It is incongruous that employers can contemplate customised benefits while maintaining a “one size fits all” approach to jobs. All the more so when the technology now exists to support job customisation – enabling women to “Lean In” on their terms.

HR practitioners in many organisations are likely to argue their flexible working policies are designed to do just that. The problem is that often these policies are not only inflexible in their application, but also are likely to sit within rigid corporate cultures and entrenched working practices that deny the possibility of combining parenthood with a senior career. In reality, most employers have been slow to accommodate truly flexible working practices. Research by the CIPD⁽²⁾ and the Workplace Employment Relations Survey in 2011 both showed that despite the existence of corporate policies offering a range of flexible working options, the biggest take up by far is for part-time (reduced) hours.

Indeed, when it comes to managing work-life balance, reducing her hours is the most likely strategy for a woman to take. This is borne out by ONS statistics⁽³⁾ which reveal that among “**Managers, Directors and Senior Officials**” more than twice as many men as women work full-time. For part-time positions, the reverse is true, with more than twice as many women working reduced hours as are men. (The overall proportion of employees working part-time in this category is very small at 8.4%.)

Among the “**Professional Occupations**”: approximately 30% more men than women work full-time. Looking at part-time employees, only one in six is a man. And again the overall proportion of employees working part-time in this category is small (17.6%).

Offering reduced hours arrangements is neither truly flexible nor effective – it's merely a way of squeezing those employees unable to balance outside responsibilities with stringent full-time hours into traditional workplace arrangements. Consideration is rarely given to whether the jobs in question are being worked effectively. What's more, research evidence suggests many reduced hours workers are employed below their skills level – at an opportunity cost to both their employer and the wider economy.

Customised jobs – the missing piece of the puzzle

There has never been a better time for employers to look at customising senior level full-time jobs so the jobholder can both feel she's keeping her feet on the career ladder and living a more balanced life. Combining smart use of technology with a deeper understanding of how flexibility can truly support balance leads to a four-step process:

1. *List the key tasks for which the post holder has been hired and what (if anything) is getting in the way of their successful completion.* While technology has been developing rapidly over the last two decades, working practices have often failed to keep up. So, for example, the overloaded inbox is a common complaint as well as a frequent barrier to effective working. . In any job there are specific tasks which require the job holder to use her specialist skills, knowledge or expertise and others which can be delegated, automated or sometimes even eliminated.
2. *Identify when, where and how these key tasks need to be carried out.* In most jobs some deliverables will be time critical while others must be carried out at a specific location (typically the workplace). Critically reviewing these two aspects can suggest where the flexibility in the job lies. And, of course, feeding into this is the fact that few people work alone so some negotiation about how colleagues can support each others' flexibility becomes important.
3. *Pinpoint the job holder's preferences for managing the work-life interface.* In the last 30 years social scientists (including psychologists) have generated an enormous amount of research into work-life balance. One key conclusion is that people tend to have a preference over whether they keep the two separate or integrate them (and how they manage that). Working in circumstances which go against their preferences is likely to make them unhappy, stressed and disengaged.
4. *Finally, identify the key stakeholders that need to be on board for the new working arrangement to succeed.* This might include customers or clients, other people inside the employing organisation and people in the job holder's wider network (such as partners, childcare providers etc).

Having worked through those four steps, the job-holder is more likely to craft a job which meets both employer expectations and personal work-life balance goals. The challenge now is to identify and develop the key skills she will need to ensure the new way of working is a success.

Fostering Grown Up Balance

Adopting a customised job approach is likely to generate an organisational culture of Grown Up Balance – where *individuals*:

- take responsibility for their own work-life integration or harmony, recognising it's a lifelong process with no such thing as “perfect balance”;
- understand that balancing their own life cannot be achieved at the expense of balance in the lives of others; and work with their network to support balance for everyone;
- and identify and seek to develop the skills they need to achieve Grown Up Balance; acknowledging these might change over the life course.

And *employers*:

- continually foster a supportive corporate culture and integral HR practices that enable balance for everyone;
- acknowledge the personal nature of balance and that it's likely to change over the life course (there is no “one size fits all” solution);
- and recognise that balanced working lies at the heart of sustainable organisations underpinning corporate sustainability strategies.

So, is your organisation ready to move with the 21st century and begin crafting Quality Flexible Jobs to support Grown Up Balance?

More information about my masterclass: Crafting Quality Flexible Jobs here:

http://www.sustainableworking.co.uk/Masterclass_crafting_quality_flexible_jobs.htm

References:

- (1) Inspiring female entrepreneurs, CIPD 2013
- (2) Flexible Working Provision and Uptake, CIPD 2012.
- (3) ONS: Labour Force Survey employment status by occupation, April - June 2011,